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The Honourable Larry Bagnell

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome to the 96th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Unfortunately, Mr. Christopherson's brother has passed away.

He won't be in town all week, so we are going to put off his election as vice-chair because he expects a big battle and he's going to have to defend himself as second vice-chair of the committee. We'll do that formality when he's here next week.

It's great to have you here again, Mr. Saganash.

As we continue our study on the use of indigenous languages in the proceedings of the House of Commons, we are pleased today to be joined by John Quirke, clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut.

Thank you for being here, and we really do thank you, because it means that we don't have to go over to the other building for our meeting. Thank you for coming all the way down from Nunavut. I'll turn the floor over to you for your opening remarks.

Nakurmiik.

Mr. John Quirke (Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Legislative Assembly of Nunavut): Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today on the occasion of your committee's hearings, as part of its study on the use of indigenous languages in the proceedings of the House of Commons. As requested by the committee, my submission today will discuss my office's experience in providing language services to the members of our legislative assembly.

First of all, I would like to begin by drawing the committee's attention to the photograph on the cover of the submission that is before you today.

Our legislature's chamber is characterized by a number of distinct features, two of which are prominently featured in this image. These are the elders' seats that are on the floor of the House and the interpreters' booths that are located above the visitor's gallery. Their prominence highlights the importance of culture and language to our institution and its members.

Data from Statistics Canada's 2016 population census indicates that Nunavut's total population is approximately 35,580. Approximately 85% of the territory's population are Inuit and approximately 85% of this number, or 25,755 people, reported being able to converse in the Inuit language.

Our legislature's membership has broadly reflected the demographics of the territory as a whole. The 22 members of the fifth assembly took office last November. Since the institution's first sitting of April 1, 1999, a total of 72 people have held or are presently holding elected office as members of the assembly. Sixty-one of the 72 current or former members are Inuit and 11 are non-Inuit.

Approximately 70% of the total number of current or former members were or are bilingual in both the Inuit language and English. Approximately 20% were or are unilingual English speakers and approximately 10% were or are unilingual speakers of the Inuit language.

All of our legislatures to date have included a mixture of language proficiencies on the part of the members. Consequently, the need to hold proceedings and to provide services to the members in more than one language has been with us since April 1, 1999.

The federal Nunavut Act formally provides for the existence of our legislative assembly. Our territorial Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act is comparable to the Parliament of Canada Act, a statute with which the committee will be very familiar. Since April 1, 1999, the legislative assembly has also passed a new territorial Official Languages Act and a new Inuit Language Protection Act.

When the territory was created on April 1, 1999, we inherited a body of statues from the Northwest Territories, including its Official Languages Act. That jurisdiction's statute recognizes a number of first nations languages that are not widely spoken in Nunavut.

The federal Nunavut Act provided that any significant amendments to the territorial Official Languages Act required the concurrence of Parliament by way of resolution. Nunavut's new Official Languages Act was passed by the territorial legislature in 2008 and the required parliamentary resolutions were subsequently passed in the House of Commons and the Senate in 2009. These were necessitated by the removal of such languages as Dogrib and Slavey from the statute.

Read together, our territorial Official Languages Act and Inuit Language Protection Act define the Inuit language to include Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun. There are a total of 25 municipalities in Nunavut. Inuktitut is the variant of the Inuit language that is predominantly spoken in 23 of these communities. Inuinnaqtun is the variant spoken in the communities of Kugluktuk and Cambridge Bay. Inuinnaqtun also differs from Inuktitut in that it is written in Roman orthography rather than in syllabics.

The territorial Official Languages Act guarantees the right of all members of the legislative assembly to use the Inuit language, English, or French during proceedings of the House. I should note that census data indicates that French is the mother tongue of approximately 1.6% of the territory's total population and that we have never had a francophone elected to the legislature. Consequently, the language is not used during proceedings.

The Rules of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, which are analogous to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, provide for a number of the requirements in relation to the translation of certain official documents, including formal minister's statements, the annual budget address, and motions.

● (1115)

As of today, we've had a total of 705 formal sittings of the house since April 1, 1999. Simultaneous interpretation between the Inuit language and English has been provided on a gavel-to-gavel basis at every single one of our 705 sittings. On average the legislature holds 35 sitting days per calendar year.

I should also note that although the Official Languages Act guarantees the right of all members of the assembly to use the Inuit language, English or French during proceedings of the house, there is actually no statutory requirement for the institution to provide simultaneous interpretation services in any language. As a practical matter, simultaneous interpretation services are required to ensure that all members can understand one another during their proceedings.

Our normal sitting hours are from 1:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and on Friday the normal sitting hours are from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. However, the house frequently sits for extended hours, especially during budget season. For example, during our most recent sitting in March, the house sat past its normal hour of adjournment on eight of 11 sittings.

In addition to the formal sittings of the house, simultaneous interpretation between the Inuit language and English is provided on a gavel-to-gavel basis at all meetings of our full caucus, which consists of all 22 members of the legislative assembly, as well as at all meetings of our regular members' caucus, which consists of members who are not cabinet ministers or the speaker. This body serves as a kind of unofficial opposition in our non-partisan, consensus-style legislature.

Simultaneous interpretation between the Inuit language and English is also provided on a gavel-to-gavel basis at all meetings of standing and special committees, as well as all televised hearings and other assembly events at which the public is permitted to attend or participate, such as our annual investiture ceremony for recipients of the territorial Order of Nunavut. I note, for example, that a total of 15 different sets of televised hearings were held by committees during the most recent assembly on the annual reports of the Auditor General and other items of business.

From time to time, our assembly has hosted national and international events at which relay interpretation has been required. For example, when a ministerial-level meeting of the Arctic Council was held in the chamber a few years ago, relay interpretation was required so that the Inuit language comments of the meeting's chair, who was at that time our territorial member of Parliament, could first be interpreted into English, and then into Russian for the benefit of that jurisdiction's participant. I should also note that when our chamber is used to host meetings of federal, provincial, and territorial ministers organized under the auspices of the Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, that organization will arrange for French-language interpreters to travel to Iqaluit for the meeting, as there is little to no local capacity to provide this service.

Our legislature's Hansard is one of only a few publications in Canada produced in more than one language. In our case, the daily Hansard is published in both English and Inuktitut. Approximately 41,000 pages of Inuktitut Hansard have been produced since April 1, 1999. Our Hansard production is contracted out to an Inuit-owned company that is located in Iqaluit. Transcripts of televised hearings of standing and special committees are also produced in both Inuktitut and English. For the committee's interest, I have brought two excerpts from such publications with me today.

Our territorial Official Languages Act requires that an Inuktitut version of a bill be made available at the time the bill is introduced. As of today, a total of 419 bills have been introduced in the legislative assembly since April 1, 1999. Responsibility for the translation of government bills falls under the territorial Department of Justice. Responsibility for translating house bills, which falls under the jurisdiction of the legislative assembly itself, falls to my office. Since April 1, 1999, a total of 39 house bills have been introduced and passed by the legislative assembly.

As I noted earlier, the Rules of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut provide for various translation requirements of documents that come before the house. As of today, a total of over 2,519 documents have been formally tabled in the assembly since its first sitting of April 1, 1999. The vast majority of official publications, including statutory required annual reports, are tabled in both English and Inuktitut. Some documents are tabled in four languages.

● (1120)

However, I wish to note that our rules do allow for documents to be immediately tabled when ready in only one language, with the requirement that translations follow. In many cases, it can take months for the translations of lengthy and technical documents to be produced, and we do not believe that it serves a useful purpose to prevent members from having any access at all to documents of interest.

The languages in which our televised proceedings are broadcast rotates on a daily basis. We recently reported to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, CRTC, that 37.5% of our total programming during each broadcast month is in Inuktitut, 37.5% is in English and 25% is in Inuinnaqtun.

It's important to recognize that the financial and human resources required to provide these language services are significant and I anticipate that the committee has taken note of the significantly different scale of operation between our legislature, which is one of the country's smallest, and the Parliament of Canada itself.

Between the start of the 2015-16 fiscal year and today we have spent roughly $3.7 million on language-related services, which includes the cost of producing Hansard and the cost of contracting the services of interpreters and translators.

The single greatest capacity challenge that we face is the very small number of humans being alive today who are able to provide quality Inuit language interpretation and translation services. We engage a core group of approximately 10 extremely hard-working and talented Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun interpreter-translators to provide sessional and intersessional language services. However, we are in competition with other entities such as the court system, other levels of government, and the private sector to engage such professionals.

This capacity challenge is not one that can be resolved by simply spending more money. As I'm sure the committee recognizes from the excellent interpretation and translation services that are provided to Parliament in the English and French languages, the skills required to be a proficient interpreter-translator are not ones that can be developed overnight or by taking a three-day course. The challenge for us is further compounded by the significantly greater linguistic differences that exist between English and the Inuit language than those that exist between English and French. There are also significant dialectical differences between the variants of the Inuit languages that are spoken in different regions and communities.

As the committee would note from the Hansard excerpt that I distributed, we have been working with such partners as the Nunavut Arctic College to build local capacity in this profession, but it is important to recognize that this is a long-term process.

I wish to conclude by again thanking the committee for its invitation to appear before you today. I hope the information I have provided will be of use to you in your deliberations, and I welcome comments and questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: *Nakurmiik.*

I just want to make sure everyone has that speech. Okay. As he said, he brought some samples of their Hansard, which is produced in English and Inuktitut. Is it okay if I distribute that? I need permission.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Please.

The Chair: Okay, please distribute it around.

The way our committee works is each party gets a time-limited chance to ask some questions. Politicians will go on forever if we don't have limits.

We'll start out with Ms. Tassi.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Quirke, for your opening statement and for being here with us today to share your experience and expertise on this.

You've spoken about the challenges you've faced, essentially financial and human resources. What can you offer to us as advice in terms of overcoming those challenges with the experience you have had?

The initiatives you have started are fantastic in terms of the differences in the language, but what are general pieces of advice that you could give us as we move forward?

Mr. John Quirke: I mentioned how much we spend, but let me just put that in context: the money I'm spending is on par with what you are spending right now in English and French. We just happen to be doing it in Inuktitut.

The amount I quoted to you was for a couple of years. Last year, for example, we spent over $900,000 on those services. When I look at my non-discretionary and discretionary budgets, I see it represents 20% of my expenditures. After I take away all the members' salaries, the benefits, the budgets for independent officers, and my salary and that my staff, it represents 20.9% of my budget. We're doing it in Inuktitut, and you're doing it here in French and English, so your figures would be way bigger than my figures.

Obviously, what you will have to look for when the House of Commons board of management—whatever your process is after the standing committee—identifies the service you're going to provide.... That is just a question of budgeting. The question of budgeting will be one thing for those people to provide those translation services. Your biggest challenge, I think, will be to make sure that you get the proper, qualified interpreters to provide that service to the members who wish to speak indigenous languages in the House. To me, in many ways it's pretty black and white in terms of budgeting—that's the easy part. It's getting the people to provide that service to you.

● (1125)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, so the human resource part is the more difficult part.

I notice here in the picture you have the translation booths right behind. Would you ever consider remote translation? Have you ever thought of that, as opposed to bringing the interpreters to you?

Mr. John Quirke: No, we've never tried that. I don't think it would work for us. We have a big issue in Nunavut in just trying to have reasonable Internet services across the whole territory. It's horrendous. I don't think it would work.

I just went to a process recently of doing an interview for a staff member. The candidates wanted to speak Inuktitut, which was fine. The question came up: what if you want to do it by telephone interview? How would that work? We've never even considered it—I never even thought about it—but I would say it would be mission impossible for us to do that.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: What about here? Let's say, for example, Internet wasn't a problem. Do you see any problems with remote translation being provided?

Mr. John Quirke: Off the top of my head, no. Again, if you go down that route, I would do it as a pilot project, but I can't foresee any issues you would have in doing that remotely.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: I notice here it looks as if you have a number of booths. Are each of those booths in the background translation booths? It looks like—

Mr. John Quirke: The farthest one on your left is for the media. The next one is for Inuktitut and English. The next one is for Inuinnaqtun and English. The next booth is actually a sessional booth that I use for my staff, but it's a type of booth. It's a booth that is similar to the other ones, so that if we ever get to the situation where we provide French interpretation, that would be our booth. It would just be a matter of moving the equipment in and plugging it in.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay.

With respect to the Hansard, you mentioned you contract that out. How does that work? What's the turnaround time for that?

Mr. John Quirke: It's a tendered contract. As I mentioned, a company in Iqaluit won it. They've had it since 1999. I think they provide a very good product.

In terms of the English Hansard or the English blues, we will normally get them the following morning between 8:00 and 10:00. The Inuktitut usually comes late in the afternoon the following day. There always will be the odd hiccup, but normally it's fair to say that the English comes between 8:00 and 10:00 in the morning, and Inuktitut in the afternoon.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: With respect to the trained interpreters you've had, you mentioned an initiative that you started. How big a challenge has that been, getting properly trained interpreters?

Mr. John Quirke: Well since day one , April 1, 1999, I can count on my hand the interpreters we've used. Four of them are still there. We've gone through quite a few interpreters over that time. They have left us only because of health reasons, or they've retired. Some of our interpreters came from NWT when we split. Obviously with the Inuktitut interpreters, we inherited them. Some of them were living in Nunavut anyway, so we automatically contracted them. They've been with us since day one. The other Inuktitut interpreters who made Yellowknife their home were part of our team from the beginning, but, over time, they have retired, etc.

What we have seen in the past two assemblies, and actually began to recognize in the second assembly, is that we're having a lot of difficulty getting new people into the stream. We've been faced with that problem since day one. We have worked with Nunavut Arctic College to try to establish an interpreter-translation program, and it has slowly developed.

I'm looking forward to the current program, because I believe they have eight or 10 students. We have let them do simultaneous translation in the house. Of course, we alerted all the members to please be patient, that they may make mistakes, but it worked out very well. I think this is the year that they graduate, so I'm looking forward to seeing how many of them will come over as contractors, or go back to the communities to provide those services.

It's a continuing challenge, in that sometimes I wonder if interpreter-translator is a career path that a lot of people want in our young community in Nunavut. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, because it won't be long until a lot of our present interpreters will be retiring.

● (1130)

The Chair: Just so you know, Filomena, the Yukon legislature also contracts out Hansard.

Do you happen to know the hourly rate that you pay a translator, because we had that from one of our other witnesses?

Mr. John Quirke: Yes, I do. I've been reading your transcripts.

We have four rates for our interpreters. The lowest rate is $650 per day, then $750, then $800 and $1,010 per day. A day is 7.5 hours long. When the interpreters come into the office in the morning, they're already doing translation of documents, or they're interpreting for committee meetings. Like I said, we start at 1:30 and they're in the booths doing translation.

We have those four rates, from $650 to $1,010 per day.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Maybe I could start with that question. You have quite a range of rates. Is that because there's a different rate for simultaneous interpreters versus those who are translating written documents?

Mr. John Quirke: No, they all do the same functions. It's based on their competence. We judge their performance, and as we see how well they're doing, they will move up to the next rate.

Mr. Scott Reid: The legislature sits on a limited number of days a year. Do they do other work for you when the house is not sitting?

Mr. John Quirke: Yes, of course, when the house is not sitting, we're the employer of first choice—I like to say that—so they're always ready and available to do our committee work, our public hearings, and our day-to-day requirements. In terms of composing correspondence for a member who is writing in both languages, they will do the translation for us at a different hourly rate.

Mr. Scott Reid: I want to ask about the Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun. I gather that, depending on which scholar you ask, Inuktitut writ large is either a language group or a dialect continuum, with a series of dialects that should be considered part of the same language. Since I don't speak any of these dialects, I have to rely on you as my sole source of information.

Are Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun mutually comprehensible?

Mr. John Quirke: With difficulty, yes. The Inuktituk speakers will have an understanding of Inuinnaqtun. There will be big differences in the translation of a word. For example, our languages commissioner in Nunavut is Inuinnaqtun. One of the things she said to me when we hired her was that she was going to have to brush up on her Inuktituk because of the differences, besides brushing up on her French.

When the Inuinnaqtun people are speaking—and from my own personal experience because my wife is Inuk—the Inuktitut speakers have to listen very carefully to what they're saying. That's the same with the Inuinnaqtun speakers too. They all have to listen very carefully to what the Inuktituk speakers are saying, because there are differences in how they interpret a word.

● (1135)

Mr. Scott Reid: You went through and told us which translators you have there, in which booths. Are there translators for Inuinnaqtun and Inuktitut and the reverse when the legislators are sitting?

Mr. John Quirke: Yes, it's the third booth in the picture. I should mention too that the Inuinnaqtun translators only come for the sittings of the House. We do not bring them in for the meetings of the standing committees, the in camera ones, unless a member asks us. In the first assembly, the use of the Inuinnaqtun language was pretty strong. We had a couple of members who spoke it freely, so when we had our committee meetings, we would bring them in. For the past couple of assemblies, Inuinnaqtun was not often used in the committee meetings. The Inuinnaqtun speaker was actually the premier, but he wouldn't be part of those meetings.

Mr. Scott Reid: One of the issues we face when dealing with this at the level of the federal Parliament is that there are some indigenous languages, of which Inuktitut is the star example, that are doing very well in terms of remaining not only the mother tongue but the preferred home language—which I think is the most robust way of measuring the health of a language—for young people as well as for older people. We also have languages that are in peril and some that are in catastrophic decline, when we take the country as a whole.

I know the situation of Inuktitut, but with regard to Inuinnaqtun, is that a language that is endangered? Is it robust in terms of its demographic prospects? I'm asking you a demographer's question, not a value judgment question, from the point of view of the kinds of measures of peril that a linguist would use.

Mr. John Quirke: I would say it's in danger. We're talking Kugluktuk and Cambridge Bay. Kugluktuk used to be called Copper Mine. There is a move to try to make it stronger. I mentioned that our language commissioner is Inuinnaqtun. That's going to help a lot and will send a message to those two communities that their language is important.

At the local level, there is of course a strong desire to preserve and promote it. The Inuktitut language, like you said, is very strong in all the other communities. Preservation of the language is very important to the culture. What I'm seeing of course is the pride. There's a lot of pride out there, with people saying, "I can speak Inuktitut. It's my mother tongue." We've seen that all across Nunavut, especially outside of Iqaluit. I just came back from Pond Inlet, where we had a full caucus retreat, and I ran into and talked to any number of children who spoke Inuktitut. They are proud of their language.

It's going to survive, and with Inuinnaqtun, I'm just hoping there is a movement to ensure that it will survive. It has its difficulties.

Mr. Scott Reid: I noticed that the Hansard you handed out is available in English and Inuktitut, but not in Inuinnaqtun. Is Hansard recorded in written form in Inuinnaqtun?

Mr. John Quirke: No.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that just a cost issue?

Mr. John Quirke: We never looked at it as a cost issue. Back in 1999, it was a question of Inuktitut being the dominant language in the 23 or 25 communities, so we went with Inuktitut. In terms of getting people who could translate Inuinnaqtun, the number of people out there is very small.

It's been syllabics and English. If it ever becomes a standard Inuktitut language, which would allow all of Nunavut to read syllabics, then it probably would happen.

● (1140)

The Chair: I forgot to welcome Mr. Morrissey to the committee.

When you said you had a caucus retreat, was that the entire legislature—I know there are no parties—or was it just the cabinet or just the opposition?

Mr. John Quirke: At Pond Inlet, it was the full caucus—all 22 members.

The Chair: Just so the members know, in some of the territories, because they only sit 35 days, unlike us, they have a lot of committee meetings that are not at the same time as the legislature is sitting.

We'll go on to Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a great pleasure to be back here.

Welcome to Mr. Quirke, and thank you for your contribution. Your experience in Nunavut will certainly be of great assistance to the study this committee is doing right now.

I just want to clarify from the outset a figure that you mentioned: the $3.7 million for fiscal year 2015-16. You said that represents 20% of your budget. Is that correct?

Mr. John Quirke: The figure that's in the document covers a couple of fiscal years.

During the last fiscal year ending March 31, 2017, I spent $980,795. That figure represents—and I'm sorry, I have to apologize, I gave the wrong percentage—21.9% of funding that I have direct control over. We have a budget of $26.8 million. I take away all the members' salaries, their pensions, premiums, all that stuff, my salary, and that of my staff and all the independent officers. The amount of money left over as discretionary that I can manage is $4.4 million—$4,474,000—and $980,000 of that money was spent for language services.

Like I mentioned before, we're doing it in English and Inuktitut. I know the figure in the House of Commons for English and French is much, much higher.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: There is another challenge that we may face in this regard, and you mentioned this in your presentation, and I want to quote you: "The single greatest capacity challenge that we face is the very small number of human beings alive today who are able to provide quality Inuit language...."

You qualify that quality. How important is that?

Mr. John Quirke: It's very important. We all know that something is always lost in interpretation from one language to another.

My real experience from day one has been, "Oh, I didn't say that. Your interpreter got it wrong", or vice versa. The dialect differences are significant enough to cause some grief.

There have been many times, especially in the second and third assemblies, where the quality of the interpretation was sufficient to cause a point of order. Now, let me explain a point of order—which I know you're all familiar with—but for our points of order, you can do a point of order the day after. One of the reasons you can do a point of order the day after, or even two days after, is that we have to go back to see what, in fact, was said in the translation.

I remember one case in the third assembly when a retired member had said something, and some member said, "Oh, I think I have a point of order". I had three interpreters in my office going through the audio/video. What did he actually say? Three of them were all looking and saying, "He said, no, no". At the end of the day we finally got it resolved, but that's what I mean by quality. You can get the highest quality interpreters around, but if your dialect doesn't agree with the dialect of the member who is speaking, that's what we ran into.

We always look for high quality, no matter what.

Thank you.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I get it.

This brings me back to a question of the four rates that you have for interpreters. You said in your testimony that "we" judge their competence. Who is "we" in this context?

● (1145)

Mr. John Quirke: Either me or my deputy clerk and my clerk assistant, who are both Inuit, and the members. The members will let us know how well the interpretation is going, and we have faced situations where we knew we did not have the right person doing the job, so we get that type of feedback.

We get feedback from the public. Those are usually dialect issues, but the feedback is from my own Inuit staff and the members themselves, and like I said, that would be the best feedback also.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Finally, obviously our challenges are going to be greater, because I don't think eventually we'll have 338 indigenous MPs in this House of Commons. I would hope that would happen, but that's going to be for another time, after the revolution, but....

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I think those challenges are attenuated by the fact that, for instance, there are about 10 or 12 indigenous MPs right now. I don't know how many of them speak fluently their language. I do, but I don't know how many others speak their language fluently, so I think the needs can be less in that sense.

I notice the syllabics. My mum can read syllabics, and I gave her Inuktitut text one day in syllabics, and she could read it without understanding what she was reading. Are syllabics taught in Nunavut?

Mr. John Quirke: I'm sorry—are they what?

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Are syllabics taught in school?

Mr. John Quirke: Yes, they are. The challenge, of course, and what the government is trying to do, is to standardize Inuktitut because of the dialects. I'm not super familiar with the education system because I don't have children going to school there, but from kindergarten to high school there are several levels of the Inuktitut language provided and taught. We found that a lot of members could speak the language perfectly but couldn't read syllabics. I know it's difficult when I look at it, but I know it is taught at home and in the schools.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go now to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, sir, for being with us here today.

I know that everyone tries to do the best they can. Even as a committee, we're looking at figuring out whether we can provide perfect interpretation services right off the bat or whether there will be some growing pains as we hopefully move forward with this. When you were giving your introduction, I couldn't help but notice that you said that some documents do not get translated for some time. I'm interested in knowing whether you have members who can speak only one language. That's my first question: are there members who can speak only one given language well?

Mr. John Quirke: Yes, we do have members who are fluent in English and speak Inuktitut, and we do have some Inuktitut members who do not speak Inuktitut whatsoever, just English.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: And then you have Inuktitut members who cannot speak English?

Mr. John Quirke: We have Inuktitut members who do not speak Inuktitut. That's correct.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: My question is around having meaningful debate, discussion, and conversations. If the interpretation is not simultaneous, or even if you're in committee and there's a document presented and another member on that committee cannot understand the document, doesn't democracy lose out and the system and the process fail due to the inability to provide that service as quickly as possible?

Mr. John Quirke: That doesn't happen. When we're holding a committee meeting of the members, every document for the members will be in both languages. When a minister is tabling a document in the house and he has only the English or only the Inuktitut, we allow the minister to still go ahead, to table that document, with the understanding that the second language is coming. We follow up on that. We want to make sure we get that document, because that document could be subject to a standing committee review. In all our standing committee meetings there's never been an issue of not having the documents in both languages.

● (1150)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Does this present delays? How long are the delays? If there is something a little bit more technical, and that's why the report from the ministers perhaps take more time, do proceedings also get held up because some language might be more technical?

Mr. John Quirke: I can't give you a definitive answer in terms of a time frame, but I would say within a month. No meeting has ever been delayed for lack of a document being translated.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You're able to get it within—

Mr. John Quirke: When we have our meetings, all the stuff that comes from me and my staff is in English and Inuktitut. The government brings in their materials and it's made very clear to them that when they're coming in as a witness, their opening comments.... If I were doing this with one of my standing committees, they would be in both languages automatically. If they're not, if the minister does not bring his opening comments in the two languages, members will just say, "That's it. Come back in half an hour with your translation" type of thing. We have a very strong routine and process.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: When a minister tables a report, have there ever been any issues or problems—you said it could take a month—with members having the right notice of the intention in the legislation? Would it be a piece of legislation or would it be something else? I think at that point you would have the right to be able to comment and act on that legislation and have knowledge of it.

Mr. John Quirke: It's never been an issue when it comes to the tabling of documents, and we're talking about annual reports that are required by legislation, etc.

In terms of the bills, now all bills have to come in three languages. In the first assembly, what happened in the first year of our operation was that the government was just bringing in bills in English and French, which it was required to do. However, at that time I had four unilingual members who said, "We don't understand what we're approving," so then the government was forced to bring in an Inuktitut version in the next sitting.

Then, when the government changed the Official Languages Act, it allowed for the bills to come in. So, they come in on day one in the three languages: English, French, and Inuktitut.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: There was something else that you had said, something about a split in the day, language spoken in the morning versus in the afternoon. At the very end, you mentioned something about splitting days, and I didn't quite understand.

Mr. John Quirke: In terms of interpreters, when they come into the office, that's from 8:30 until 6. The session is from 1:30 to 6, so they're in the booth. In the morning, they will either be doing translation of documents or doing simultaneous translation for committee meetings. That's what I meant by the split.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay, I was thinking of something else, and I didn't know how that would logistically work, but that makes a lot more sense.

Thank you.

I think my colleague, David Graham, has a question.

The Chair: David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a couple of questions.

I'm not completely clear on the answer to Ruby's first question. Do any members not speak any English in the current legislature?

Mr. John Quirke: All the members speak English. In the previous assembly, one member didn't speak English.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do you ever provide translation between the two languages other than English? Have there been circumstances where you've provided translation between Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, between the two languages and not to English?

Mr. John Quirke: No.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Here on the Hill you can't get a job doing anything at all outside of political jobs if you don't speak both English and French. Are there hiring requirements like that in the Nunavut legislature? Are people required to speak at least one other language to work there?

Mr. John Quirke: Okay, now we're getting into the Constitution and into the land claim agreement. In Nunavut, 85% of the people are Inuit. The government would want 85% of the civil service to be able to speak Inuktitut, and it's working towards that goal.

I just mentioned that I just did an interview for one of my staff, and I said that in that particular position Inuktitut is desirable. That was enough to screen out a lot of people.

There are positions where you definitely need Inuktitut. The government, of course, rewards those staff members by giving them a bilingual bonus. Obviously, when we hired the language commissioner, Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun was extremely important to us.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay, thank you.

● (1155)

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll just quickly follow up on that. How much is the bilingual bonus? Do you know if it's different for different positions or what the amount might be?

Mr. John Quirke: It's a standard amount, and I'll have to get back to you on that. I'd like to say that it's $1,200 or $2,000 or something. Now there's a new incentive for people to learn Inuktitut and the bonus is going up, but I will get that information and pass it to Andrew later on.

Mr. John Nater: That would be great. In the federal public service, it's been $800 for several decades, so it's hardly much of an incentive any more.

I'm curious about the language commissioner position. Does she actively investigate, does she only investigate upon a complaint, or does she do both? How does that position work?

Mr. John Quirke: It's usually complaint driven, but she's very active in going out into the private sector to promote all four languages, including French. How active is she? Well, let me put it this way: she wants to take the Canada Revenue Agency to court for not providing income tax forms in Inuktitut.

Mr. John Nater: That's interesting. I look forward to seeing that.

I think you mentioned that 1.3% speak French or have French as their initial language. Are there many requests from the general public for documents in French from the legislature?

Mr. John Quirke: No, not from us, but quite a few of the government annual reports come in English and French. We've had French spoken in our legislature. It was pre-arranged. We got advance notice. It was for something special on an anniversary of the francophone association of Nunavut. When we have our public hearings on the Official Languages Act, we will do it in all four languages. I will fly up French interpreter-translators from Ottawa. That's a given. I hope that helps.

Mr. John Nater: Yes, absolutely. Is that done through the translation bureau here at Parliament or through the private sector?

Mr. John Quirke: I believe that in the beginning we got the names from the Clerk of the House of Commons. We've kept that inventory, so we would contact directly those contractors who provide the services to the House of Commons.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you.

The Chair: In theory, our time is up. Does anyone else have any questions they'd like to ask?

Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I have a quick question.

You mentioned in your brief the competition with other entities, such as the court system and other levels of government. I'd like you to elaborate on that, because I think that's an important point that you've raised. Is the Nunavut legislature contemplating measures to correct that situation and to have those interpreters either exclusively or on a priority basis?

Mr. John Quirke: That's a good question. I have 14 interpreters. I take great pleasure and pride in the fact that they consider us their first employer of choice, and they've become very dedicated to us. For 99% of the time, we can count on them to be there. We have our sessional calendar and they know when we're meeting, so they're committed to us.

For the other agencies, other government departments, and aboriginal organizations like NTI and the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, I guess we have set the bar to the point where, when they see what we're paying, they have to raise their bar too. We've created those levels. Hopefully, as I said, when graduates come out of the Arctic College, there would be more of a supply, but right now the demand and supply are difficult. Like I say, we're very pleased that we're their employer of first choice.

● (1200)

The Chair: Anyone else?

David, were you finished?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm done.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Nakurmiik. It's been great and helpful for us. We appreciate your coming today with some very interesting information.

Committee members, now we're going to suspend so we can go in camera. If anyone who's not supposed to be here could leave, that would be great.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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